

SPEAK NOW: MEMORIES OF THE CIVIL RIGHTS ERA
RECORDING SESSIONS

W. J. Megginson

Moderated by LeAnna Welch-Dawson

Wednesday, June 15, 2011

William Winter Archives and History Building
Jackson, Mississippi

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Participant: Megginson, W. J.

Title: *Speak Now: Memories of the Civil Rights Era* / Memories of W. J. Megginson, Wednesday, June 15, 2011 / moderated by LeAnna Welch-Dawson

Scope Note: The Mississippi Department of Archives and History in conjunction with the 50th Anniversary of the Freedom Rides and to complement the Department's exhibit "*Freedom Rides: Journey for Change*" conducted recording sessions with local citizens to gather oral memories of the Civil Rights Era. The participants were also given the opportunity to have their photograph taken in front of the exhibit. The recordings were conducted in the spring and summer of 2011 at the William F. Winter Archives and History Building in Jackson, Mississippi.

DAWSON: Ok Speak Now recording number 13. This is LeAnna Welch-Dawson with the Mississippi Department of Archives and History. Today's date is Thursday, June 15, 2011. Now sharing...

MEGGINSON: Wednesday.

DAWSON: Oh, excuse me, Wednesday. Thank you. Wednesday, June 15, 2011. Now sharing his Civil Rights Era memories is Mr. W. J. Megginson. Hi.

MEGGINSON: Hi. I have relatively few memories but, and they probably don't shed a very good light but it will give some illustration of what was happening at the time and how people were reacting to it.

And I guess the first important point is to note that I was a kid in school at the time so I wasn't very well educated about what was going on, I just knew mostly what was in the newspaper. The Clarion Ledger was of course heavily skewed in the way it was interpreting all of this and presenting it and that's basically the amount of information I had, other than being instructed from my family, "Don't go downtown in the midst of all this," in the sense that they, they feared that I might get caught up in something or I'm not sure what the exact expectation was, but I was certainly told not to go down there.

I recall the jeering that went on by people as the buses were coming into town, and then as people were being processed into the, the prison. I don't remember in detail when and how that happened but I remember very much that occurring and some of what I remember may have been as much, what was being covered on TV at the time as what I actually saw in person.

During that particular time it happened that a cousin from South Carolina, who was a year younger than me, was in town and he drew a diagram which must have been about...a foot wide and maybe six inches high or a little bit higher, illustrating what he perceived as one or two of the Freedom Riders and not in a very good light.

I hadn't really thought about this until the last few minutes but I don't recall...let me ask a question if you know, what month was it the Freedom Riders came in?

DAWSON: May.

MEGGINSON: May. Can you give me a better date?

DAWSON: Around the 24th—it was in the twenties.

MEGGINSON: Ok. So that sets the, the scene that by that time I was probably out of school

for the summer, and I don't remember any discussion of this going on either while we were still in school or three months later when I came back. So there's very, very limited information in my mind about that.

What I do particularly remember now that I connect it, is having read, "The Help." Every single thing I read in that book struck me as exactly true of what was being said at the time. I was absolutely amazed when I saw the author in person, because she is something like 33 I believe it is, give or take a year. And yet I thought that every single thing she said was so true to what went on at the time that she must've been my age. It was just amazing to see that somebody who had not lived through the period of time was able to absorb it and display it so effectively as she has.

The one additional thing I can add, and I don't know the exact timing, it was probably a bit later than the people coming through—the Freedom Riders—but at some point not too long after that, I know, that, well first my mother had a maid—the term at the time—probably two days a week maybe for half days and the next door neighbor had a maid for a longer period of time because she had three or four children, so a need—perceived need—for more of that. At some point after the Freedom Riders but part of this whole story, the maid that my mother had asked for a dollar increase in her hourly pay and was told to leave. And the same exact thing happened to my next door neighbor.

And that's all I can tell you but it gives...

DAWSON: Right

MEGGINSON: ...a particular view you may not be getting from everyone else.

DAWSON: Thank you so much for sharing.

MEGGINSON: You're welcome.

DAWSON: Ok.

END OF RECORDING

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